EU, Mercosur bloc ink major trade deal, reject tariffs and protectionism

Accord creates one of the world's largest free trade areas after 25 years of tricky negotiations

ASUNCION: South American and European Union officials on Saturday signed a major trade deal, which they hailed as sending a powerful message at a time of tariff threats, global uncertainty and protectionism.

The deal between the 27-nation European Union and Mercosur bloc members Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay creates one of the world's largest free trade areas after 25 years of tricky negotiations.

It was given fresh impetus amid the sweeping use of tariffs and trade threats by US President Donald Trump's administration, which has sent countries scrambling for new partnerships.

Trump on Saturday threatened multiple European nations with tariffs of up to 25 percent until he manages to gain control of the Danish territory Greenland.

"We choose fair trade over tariffs, we choose a productive long-term partnership over isolation," EU chief Ursula Von der Leyen said at the signing ceremony in Asuncion, Paraguay.

Paraguay's President Santiago Pena also praised the treaty as sending "a clear signal in favor of international trade" in "a global scenario marked by tensions." European Council head Antonio Costa said the deal stood in contrast to "the use of trade as a geopolitical weapon." And Brazil's Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira said the deal was a "bulwark in the face of a world battered by unpredictability, protectionism, and coercion."

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva — a key architect of the accord — was unable to attend the ceremony due to scheduling conflicts, and met with Von der Leyen in Rio de Janeiro on Friday where he praised it as a victory for multilateralism.

In Paraguay, leaders said the treaty would bring jobs, prosperity, and opportunities to people on both sides of the Atlantic.

'It's not fair'

Together, the EU and Mercosur account for 30 percent of global GDP and more than 700 million consumers. The treaty — which still needs to be approved by the EU parliament and ratified by each Mercosur nation — eliminates tariffs on more than 90 percent of bilateral trade. It is expected to come into force by the end of 2026.

The deal will favor European exports of cars, wine and cheese, while making it easier for South American beef, poultry, sugar, rice, honey and soybeans to enter Europe.

This has angered European farmers, who have rolled tractors into cities like Paris, Brussels and Warsaw to protest a feared influx of cheaper goods produced with lower standards and banned pesticides.

"We have good quality Irish beef and good standards here, and they don't have the same standards in South American countries," said Trisha Chatterton, a 50-year-old farmer at a protest in Ireland earlier this month.

"It's not fair," said Luis, a 24-year-old Belgian cattle farmer who took part in a December protest that turned ugly, as demonstrators set piles of tires on fire and hurled potatoes at police.

Key power Germany, as well as Spain and the Nordic countries, strongly support the pact, eager to boost exports as Europe grapples with Chinese competition and a tariff-happy administration in the White House. Some in South America are also wary about the impact of the treaty.

In Argentina, it is estimated that there could be a loss of 200,000 jobs just from the dismantling of the local automotive industry, trade and investment researcher Luciana Ghiotto said.—AFP

Shooting in South African township leaves seven dead

CAPE TOWN: Gunmen killed seven people in a township outside the South African city of Cape Town early on Saturday in an incident believed to be extortion-related, police said.

The attack is the latest in a string of mass shootings that have shaken the crime-weary country of 63 million people.

"Police are investigating a shooting incident in Marikana that claimed the lives of seven people — one woman and six men aged between 30 and 50," police said in a statement.

Three people were also wounded in the attack, which occurred shortly after midnight and was "believed to be linked to extortion in the area", it said. "The suspects fled the scene and no arrests have been made," police said, adding that a manhunt had been launched and investigations were ongoing.

South Africa, the continent's most industrialised nation, is grappling with entrenched crime and corruption driven by organised networks

On average, around 63 people were killed each day between July and September last year, according to police data.

Two separate mass shootings in December, in which gunmen stormeda hostel and a bar, left two dozen people dead, including several children. Saturday's attack occurred in the city's Cape Flats area, which has a reputation for gang violence and where over 2,000 murders were recorded in the first nine months of 2025..—AFP

ERBIL: Massoud Barzani, a leader of Iraqi Kurds, and Mazloum Abdi, the head of Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, meet US Special Envoy Tom Barrack in Iraq.—AFP

Damascus takes control of more territory, seizes two oil fields

• Decree declares Kurdish a 'national language' of Syria • US envoy meets head of Syrian Kurdish forces in Iraq

DEIR HAFER/ERBIL: Syria's army said on Saturday that its forces had taken control of swathes of the region east of Aleppo city after Kurdish forces agreed to withdraw following recent clashes.

The advance comes a day after President Ahmed al-Sharaa issued a decree declaring Kurdish a "national language" and granting the minority official recognition in an apparent goodwill gesture, though the Kurds said it fell short of their aspirations.

The United States for years has supported the Kurds but also backs Syria's new authorities, and US envoy Tom Barrack was in Erbil and met Mazloum Abdi, head of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a source in the presidency of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region said.

A correspondent in Deir Hafer, some 50 kilometres (30 miles) east of Aleppo city, saw several SDF fighters leaving the town and a large number of residents who had fled the area returning, under a heavy presence of soldiers and security forces.

Abdi committed to redeploying his forces east of the Euphrates River following "calls from friendly countries and mediators". In statements to state television, Syria's army said it had taken control of "34 villages and towns" east of Aleppo, including the key towns of Deir Hafer and Maskana, as well as a military airport. But it accused the SDF of violating the agreement and targeting an army patrol near Maskana, "killing two soldiers". It also said it had secured the exit of "more than 200 SDF organisation fighters and their weapons".

Oil fields seized

Syria's army seized the oil fields of Sufyan and Thawrah in northern Syria, where Kurdish fighters have been withdrawing from dozens of towns and villages under an agreement meant to avoid a bloody showdown.

Kurdish forces still control some of Syria's largest oil fields in the Deir el-Zor province further east. Syria's government says those fields must be managed by central authorities.

Presidential decree

The SDF, meanwhile, accused Damascus of violating the agreement, saying the army entered the towns of Deir Hafer and Maskana "before our fighters had fully withdrawn, creating a highly dangerous situation".

Syria's army had deployed reinforcements near Deir Hafer after driving Kurdish forces out of Aleppo city following deadly clashes last week. It had told the SDF to evacuate the area between Deir Hafer and the Euphrates, around 30 kilometres further east, as well as towards the south.

Syria's Islamist-led government is seeking to extend its authority across the country following the ousting of longtime leader Bashar al-Assad in late 2024.

Progress on implementing a March deal to integrate the Kurds' de facto autonomous administration and forces into the state has stalled amid differences between the two sides, including the Kurds' demand for decentralised rule.

Sharaa's announcement on Friday was the first formal recognition of Kurdish rights since Syria's independence in 1946.

The decree stated that Kurds are "an essential and integral part" of Syria, where they have suffered decades of marginalisation and oppression under former rulers.

It made Kurdish a "national language" that can be taught in public schools in areas where the community is heavily present, and granted nationality to all Kurds, 20 percent of whom had been stripped of it under a controversial 1962 census.

'Drive a wedge'

The Kurdish administration in Syria's north and northeast said the decree was "a first step, however it does not satisfy the aspirations and hopes of the Syrian people".

"Rights are not protected by temporary decrees, but... through permanent constitutions that express the will of the people and all components" of society, it said in a statement.—Agencies

LEIPZIG (Germany): Protesters attend a pro-Palestinian demonstration.—Reuters

Iraq takes full control of air base after US withdrawal

BAGHDAD: US forces have withdrawn from Iraq's Ain al-Asad Airbase, which housed US-led forces in Western Iraq, and the Iraqi army has assumed full control, the Iraqi defence ministry said on Saturday.

In 2024, Washington and Baghdad reached an understanding on plans for the withdrawal of US-led coalition forces from Iraq and a move towards a bilateral security relationship.

Ain al-Asad has hosted US and coalition troops for years and has been repeatedly targeted by Iran-backed armed groups during periods of heightened regional tensions, including after the 2020 US killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani.

An Iraqi army colonel confirmed the US forces withdrawal from the base, saying there were a few soldiers remaining due to some logistical issues. He did not give further details for security reasons.

It was not immediately clear when the withdrawal started, but the initial plan stipulated that hundreds of troops would leave by September 2025, with the rest departing by the end of 2026.—Reuters

Hundreds in London protest against Beijing 'mega embassy'

LONDON: Hundreds of people on Saturday rallied in London against Beijing's new "mega" embassy, days ahead of a decision on the plan.

Protesters, their faces mostly covered with scarves or masks, chanted "No to Chinese embassy" and waved flags reading "Free Hong Kong. Revolution now". Others held up placards with slogans such as "MI5 warned. Labour kneeled", referring to the UK's domestic intelligence agency and Prime Minister Keir Starmer's ruling party.

Others read: "CCP (Chinese Communist Party) is watching you. Stop the mega embassy." China has for several years been trying to relocate its embassy, currently in the British capital's upmarket Marylebone district, to the sprawling historic site in the shadow of the Tower of London.

The move has sparked fierce opposition from nearby residents, rights groups and critics of China's ruling Communist Party. The latest protest came ahead of an expected decision this week.

Benedict Rogers, head of the human rights group Hong Kong Watch, said if it got the go-ahead it was "highly likely" that the site "will be used for espionage", citing the sensitive underground communications cables close to the site.

He said China had already been "carrying out a campaign of transnational repression against different diaspora communities" and other critics and predicted that that would "increase and intensify".

A protester who gave his name only as Brandon, for fear of reprisals, said the plans raised a "lot of concerns". The 23-year-old bank employee, originally from Hong Kong but now living near Manchester in northwestern England, said many Hong Kongers had moved to the UK "to avoid authoritarian rule in China". But they now found there could be an embassy in London serving as an "operations base" for Beijing. "I don't think it's good for anyone except the Chinese government," he said.—AFP

Judge asks US govt to grant visa to deported student

BOSTON: A US judge on Friday gave the Trump administration three weeks to "rectify the mistake" it made by deporting a college student to Honduras while she was traveling home to spend Thanksgiving with her family in Texas, and he recommended it issue her a student visa.

US District Judge Richard Stearns in Boston imposed the deadline after a lawyer for the administration earlier this week apologized for having violated a court order that should have prevented 19-year-old Any Lucia Lopez Belloza from being sent to Honduras.

Lopez Belloza is a Honduran national who was brought to the United States by her mother when she was 8 while seeking asylum. She has said she was unaware she was subject to a removal order.

"There is happily no one-size-fits-all solution for seeing that justice be done in what all agree was an amalgam of errors that ended badly for Any," Stearns said.

He said the "simplest solution" would be for the US Department of State to issue her a student visa.

The alternative, he said, would be for him to order President Donald Trump's administration to arrange for Lopez Belloza's return, with a threat of holding the government in contempt if it refused.

He gave the administration 21 days to inform him of how it will proceed. Todd Pomerleau, her lawyer, in an email welcomed the ruling, saying it will help him negotiate with the government "to come up with a solution to bring Any to the United States in the near future." The Justice Department declined to comment.

Lopez Belloza, a freshman at Babson College in Massachusetts, was arrested on November 20 while at Boston's airport preparing to travel home to Texas to surprise her family for Thanksgiving. —Reuters

Minneapolis keeps guard over schools amid ICE arrests

MINNEAPOLIS: Peter Brown's gray mustache and beard were matted with ice as he stood watch on a frigid on Friday afternoon outside Green Central Elementary, not far from where a US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent fatally shot Renee Good last week.

Wearing a neon green vest and equipped with a whistle and walkie-talkie, Brown, an 81-year-old retired lawyer who lives nearby, kept his head on a swivel. His eyes were taking in each passing car and pedestrian near the campus as he stood ready to sound the alarm should federal immigration personnel approach the school, which teaches in English and Spanish and is around the corner from the spot where Good died.

"I never did like bullies, and that's what the federal government has become," Brown said, explaining why an octogenarian stood outside for four hours in -2 degrees Fahrenheit with wind chill (-19 Celsius). "What's happening in my city is nothing more than authoritarian intimidation, and me and my neighbours are not going to put up with it."

Parents patrol schools

The Trump administration has deployed about 3,000 federal agents across the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, making it the latest region targeted by the president's mass deportation programme. People who normally might be organising parent-teacher association meetings are arranging security patrols at their kids' schools to watch for immigration agents.

Some parents not on patrol are escorting foreign-born teachers or staff members, driving them to and from their homes and schools to make them feel safer. Others are delivering groceries and prescription medicines to immigrant families who are too afraid to leave their homes or send their kids to class.

US Senator Amy Klobuchar, a Democrat representing Minnesota, said she had met with school principals from her state "and heard horror stories of kids and parents 'under siege' by ICE." "Little kids scared. Dangerous encounters. This is no longer about a fraud investigation," Klobuchar wrote on social media, as she urged residents to remain peaceful.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees ICE and the Border Patrol, said this week more than 2,500 people have been arrested during the effort that officials have dubbed Operation Metro Surge. DHS has repeatedly said its agents are not targeting schools, but focusing on convicted criminals. But parents and school leaders say otherwise.

A spokesperson for Saint Paul Public Schools said in a statement that two of its contracted student transportation vans were pulled over by ICE agents this week. Several schools and daycare centers have emailed parents to notify them of teachers and staff who have been detained, according to school leaders and parents. DHS did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

US CUSTOMS and Border Protection agents charge towards demonstrators during a protest in Minneapolis, Minnesota.—Reuters

Schools have notified the public that some parents have been detained at bus stops after dropping off kids. Border Patrol agents clashed with protesters on the grounds of Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis as classes ended, just a few hours after Good was shot and killed. DHS said the clash followed agents' pursuit of someone who had rammed one of their vehicles several miles away and fled to the school grounds.

Several school districts including those in Minneapolis and St. Paul, the state's two largest have cancelled classes some days and are allowing students to learn online instead of attending classes in person for the next several weeks in response to the immigration operations.

Many families in my area are afraid to send their kids to school because ICE is staking out our bus stops, state Representative Carlie Kotyza-Witthuhn, a Democrat and co-chair of the Minnesota House of Representatives' Children and Families Finance and Policy Committee, told the Star Tribune newspaper.

Nate Byrne, a spokesperson for Kids Count on Us, a coalition of 500 community-based childcare centers in Minnesota, said it is receiving daily reports about ICE officers on or near childcare center grounds, and that such centers in immigrant-heavy neighborhoods have seen a 50pc reduction in attendance.

Kids Count on Us has received reports of childcare workers taken into ICE custody, Byrne said, though he did not have specific figures.—Reuters